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Responding to Dr Plant

Michael Purcell

University of Edinburgh, UK

Abstract

This response to Dr Plant engages with important issues regarding the possibility of using the work of Emmanuel Levinas as a theological tool and resource. Levinas 'and' theology is both an important conjunction and disjunction. The distinction between a theology that is fundamental and a theology that is dogmatic needs to be stressed. Levinas' ethical metaphysics, and his recognition of the need for a theological recuperation of the ethics he espouses, opens up a possible and fundamental theological dialogue which recognizes the fundamental and salvific importance of the ordinary and the everyday in human existence.

Keywords

Levinas, theology, phenomenology, religion, Jean-Luc Marion

Dr Plant's review is welcome, and I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to some of the important points he raises in his critique of *Levinas and Theology*. There are indeed 'questions about Levinas' work' (including its theological significance) that arise.

Levinas and Theology

A preliminary remark to situate the work: 'and' can be such a problematical word, as in '*Levinas and Theology*'. 'And' operates both conjunctively and disjunctively. It attempts to associate difference, to connect the unconnected, but perhaps not with a view to reconciliation. I am reminded of Dondeyne's early article, 'Inleiding tot het denken van E. Levinas', soon after the publication of *Totality and Infinity*, in which he stresses the significance of 'and'.¹ It is not

¹ Albert Dondeyne, 'Inleiding tot het denken van E. Levinas', *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie*, 25:3–4 (1963), 555–584 at 555.

Totality or Infinity, but *Totality and Infinity*, for Levinas never denies totality but subjugates it to infinity. The Infinity of the other person is beyond but remains related to the totality of being. The question is one of understanding the relation. In similar but much lesser vein, it is *Levinas and Theology*, and the kind of conversation that might be possible between them. Levinas, interrogating Heidegger, asks whether ontology is fundamental, and his conclusion is that ethics, not ontology, is fundamental. What I want to argue is that for a theology that would be fundamental or foundational, it is ethics not ontology that is also fundamental: there is, as Levinas suggests, ‘an original ethical event which would also be first theology’.²

Now, the question of foundations sits uneasily in a post-modern environment in which foundations and canons are proscribed. No one thought or perspective can be privileged over another. Yet, Levinas may be depicted as a foundationalist beyond any foundation that is ontological. For Levinas, the foundation or the canon is inscribed in the face of an other person, and no one person can be privileged over another: ethics is the risk of comparing incomparables, and the trace of absolute alterity in the face of the other is indecipherable other than by way of response and responsibility. Such a non-foundational foundationalism—ethics by any other name—is perhaps addressed by Jean-Luc Marion, particularly where intuition exceeds intention.³ But perhaps the notion of ‘foundation’ is the original ontological fault: origin may be a better way of proceeding. The other comes first.

Fundamentals and Origins

Levinas has an allergic reaction to theology, just as he has an allergic reaction to mysticism. Theology is theory and attempts to capture the creator-God as concept, thereby transgressing the transcendence of God. Mysticism attempts an immediate relation with God. In both, the world is by-passed, and the other person is passed by just as the man on the road from Jericho was passed-by by all but the Samaritan traveller. For Levinas, the world cannot be by-passed; it is the necessary detour. As Levinas notes in *Totality and Infinity*, “The true

² Emmanuel Levinas, *Is It Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas* (California: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 182.

³ See Jean-Luc Marion, *Le visible et le révélé* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2005) for an accessible exposition of Marion’s reworking of Husserl’s theory of intentionality. The work is currently only available in French.

life is absent". But we are in the world'.⁴ This world, however, needs to be construed in terms of ethics rather than ontology, and any attempt to give a theological account of being-in-the world needs also to be articulated in terms of ethics, not ontology. 'Without the signification they draw from ethics, theological concepts remain empty and formal frameworks',⁵ and thus ethics, as Levinas states, is 'first theology'. This notion of ethics as 'first theology' comes late in Levinas' reflection in an interview published in *Is It Righteous to Be?* For the most part Levinas' criticism of theology is aimed at the speculative and dogmatic, and it could be argued that his aversion to theology matches his aversion to ontology, an onto-theo-logical aversion. However, what Levinas reacts against, it seems to me, is dogmatic theology rather than fundamental theology. It is the notion of 'first' or fundamental theology that I wish to stress and clarify.

Generally speaking (but not wholly), it would be fair to say that the notion of fundamental theology (as opposed to dogmatic theology) is more familiar in a catholic theological environment than in a reformed theological environment, just as the relationship of phenomenology and theology tends to be more predominant in that environment also. Fundamental theology would consider more the existential structures of human experience and theological method, and how these open on to the possibility of saying something about God. Following David Tracy, in *The Analogical Imagination*, we can distinguish fundamental theology, systematic theology and practical theology.⁶ Fundamental theologies seek 'to provide arguments that all reasonable persons... can recognise as reasonable', and therefore has recourse to 'experience, intelligence, rationality, and responsibility'.⁷ Fundamental theologies privilege that critical enquiry which is 'proper to its academic setting'.⁸ Although related to systematic and practical theologies and sharing their concerns, fundamental theologies, tend to 'abstract themselves from all religious 'faith commitments' for the legitimate purpose of critical analysis of all religious and theological

⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1979), p. 33.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁶ David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (London: SCM Press, 1981). Avery Dulles likewise notes, 'Fundamental theology... is predogmatic because... it does not rest on a finished theory regarding revelation and its mediation through tradition and ecclesiastical pronouncements. Rather, by fashioning such a theory, it contributes to the foundations for dogmatic theology' (A. Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (New York: Orbis, 1992), p. 15).

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁸ *Ibid.*

claims'.⁹ Further, with regard to meaning and truth claims, fundamental theologies, in attempting to have a genuinely public character, have a concern with the 'adequacy or inadequacy of truth claims' of a tradition, and will engage with other disciplines in the humanities.¹⁰ Thus, fundamental theology is often spoken of as philosophical theology.¹¹ It is in this context of working towards a fundamental theology that Levinas' emphasis on ethics is particularly helpful. Levinas, it seems to me, offers the possibility of a fundamental theology 'drawn from ethics', and an ethical voice and grammar by which to decline the theological subject of modernity in terms of intersubjectivity and responsibility: the 'I' confronted with the other person becomes declined as me, and for and to and towards. Levinas' ethical emphasis declines the ego-centred subject of modernity, and chooses to decline the subject in terms of alterity. The existential structure of subjectivity is marked by an openness to alterity, an openness that is effected by the ingress of the other into my existence. The other person arrives on my doorstep unannounced.

Now, although the notion of fundamental theology is important, to speak of foundations could be seen as an attempt to rescue the ontological structures of existence; thus, the difficulty of concluding whether Levinas works towards an otherwise than being or a being otherwise. My own view on this would be that it is the otherwise than being—the ethical incursion of the other person rather than his or her being ontologically positioned—that provokes a being otherwise in which responsibility for the other person is the imperative that guides the working for justice and the transformation of the structures of society. My own view increasingly is that one should speak not so much about foundations, but about origins. 'First theology' relates to an ethical event that is 'original'.¹²

We can see this insight into origin in Levinas' stress on the anteriority of the posterior, or, the strange logic of causes coming after their effects. Although Levinas' phenomenological, intersubjective reduction must also start from the here of consciousness, thought discovers that it is not its own origin, but is provoked by that which is posterior yet only come upon lately. Thought would seem to be anterior to its object, but, in effect, it is provoked by a precedent or prevenient. As Jean-Luc Marion will stress, taking Levinas even further, the phenomenon gives itself to thought, with an excess of intuition over intention.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Levinas, *Is It Righteous to Be?*, p. 182.

Items Raised in the Review

Religion and Religiosity

To turn more particularly to items raised in the review: is religion reduced to ‘religiosity’? Not necessarily so; as long as one keeps religion as responsible hearing and doing to the fore, although admittedly there comes a stage at which faith enters in. Ethics is not excluded from the *praeparatio evangelium*, and a phenomenological approach to religion can open on to the *possibility* of fundamental theology. Merold Westphal puts it well, in reference to Marion: ‘The difference between phenomenology and theology is that what the theologian affirms on the basis of faith as actual, the phenomenologist merely describes as possible... As a theory of possibility [phenomenology] remains neutral with respect to actuality’.¹³

Philosophy and Scripture

Levinas recognizes two basic languages: Greek and Hebrew; a philosophical canon and a scriptural canon. However, in so far as both philosophy and Scripture are trying to make sense of the one human existential, both share a common concern. Scripture can also be read phenomenologically insofar as it gives an insight into human existence and transcendence, and the attempt at a human relation with God.¹⁴

It is true that Judaism (as also Christianity) does have a particular singularity. However, Levinas should not be read as privileging a particular religious tradition. In fact, a counter-criticism could be raised against Levinas: in his account of the ‘other’, he removes the other from his or her particular historical and cultural context. One sees this in ‘Meaning and Sense’ in *Humanism of the Other*, where he states that ‘[s]ignification is before Culture and Aesthetics; it is situated in Ethics, presupposition of all Culture and all signification. Morality does not belong to Culture; it allows us to judge culture, to evaluate the dimension of its elevation. Elevation ordains being’.¹⁵ As original, ethics

¹³ M. Westphal, ‘Transfiguration as a Saturated Phenomenon’, *Journal of Philosophy and Scripture*, 1:1 (2003), 26–35 at 28.

¹⁴ André Thayse, for example, has an interesting exegetical series on the four gospels which open up the phenomenological dimension of the gospels. (A. Thayse, *Matthieu, Marc, Luc, Jeanne: L’Evangile revisité* (Brussels: Editions Racine, 1997–2001).

¹⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanism of the Other* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), p. 36.

makes signification—even cultural signification—and the judgement of cultures possible.

Now, this could be criticized for failing to recognize the role and value of culture and history. However, Levinas does not deny the importance of cultural expression. His key point is that ethics, which makes signification possible, calls culture to give an account of itself. Ethics not cultural expression should not determine or dictate how another is either viewed or treated. So:

Expression is a relation with the one to whom I express expression and whose presence is already required in order that my cultural gesture of expression can be produced. The Other who faces me is not included in the totality of being that is expressed... He is neither a cultural signification nor a simple given. He is, primordially, *sense* because he lends it to expression itself, because only through him can a phenomenon such as signification introduce itself, of itself, into being.¹⁶

I can appreciate why he does this, as being determined by history and culture can often lead to the violence and exclusion that is current in modern societies, beset as they are with the rise of nationalism and the limiting of immigration, and the tendency to promote the totality of the same over the infinity of the other.

Ethical Access to the Other

Plant claims that my statement that the ‘other’ is not directly accessible ‘from the inside’... ‘does not in itself possess any obvious ethical significance. Indeed, it is hard to cash out this ‘otherness’ in non-epistemological terms—albeit negatively, as that which resists knowledge’.

But surely, it is in the very unease that the ‘I’ experiences before the other, and the response that is provoked that needs an epistemological accounting. Ethics precedes even epistemology. One may feel indignation at the plight of the other and an ensuing passion for justice; one may feel pity and be moved to respond; one may be filled with shame, or blame, for what I could have done but did not do. I must give an account of myself before the other, but this being called to account is a fundamentally ethical provocation of the subject, before ever that original ethical situation in which I find myself is fleshed out into moral response. Ethics calls epistemology also to give an account of this original ethical situation.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 30 (original italics).

That the other is radically other is a further epistemological challenge. But being radically other does not mean a disincarnate or immaterial existence. The other is present in all his or her misery, with upward eyes (hence the appeal to *me*), and yet this appeal has the force of a command. I can still turn away and pass by on the other side, but even the decision to walk away is already a response, and subject to ethical judgement. Certainly, Levinas does present an extreme ethics of response and responsibility.

Salvation and the Everyday

Everyday existence is a preoccupation with salvation. In saying this, I do not want to employ the term 'salvation'—or 'redemption' or 'liberation'—in any dogmatic sense, but more phenomenologically and existentially. I recognize with Levinas and against Heidegger that the ordinary hopes, joys and anxieties, and the quotidian preoccupations, are not to be dismissed as inauthentic or disparaged as everyday. The struggle for daily bread (*panem quotidianem*) is as much a daily reality as it is a prayer. It seems to me that the ordinary and the everyday is the lot of most people. In this sense, Levinas does broaden the sense of what it means to find oneself incarnate in the world, a particular incarnation of which I was neither author nor arbiter either in terms of time or place.